BOLDLY . . . RESPONSIBLY . . . FAITHFULLY
June 13, 2004
(The Sunday of the congregational vote on
a joint development and air rights proposal)

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 8
Matthew 25:14–30

"To all those who have, more will be given."
Matthew 25:29 (NRSV)

O God, we commend to you this congregation on this important day.
We give you thanks and pray for all its members,
here and scattered throughout the country and world.
We give you thanks and pray for our neighbors and friends
with whom we share life in this community.
Bless us, O God, with your gifts of wisdom,
patience with one another, and grace.
And startle us now, with your truth in Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is the truth and the way and the life,
and in whose name we pray. Amen.

Do you remember the first time you were entrusted by your parents or some other authority figure with major responsibility? For many of us, driving the family car without a parent present was it. For me, it was building a fire in the furnace. Life with a coal furnace was a challenge, and building a coal fire in the furnace something of an art form, long lost with gas furnaces and thermostats. When the weather turned cold, you had to go down in the basement, shovel coal from the coal cellar, and build a fire inside the furnace. It involved wads of paper, coal stacked just so, grates open and clear to provide a draft from below. I watched Dad do it for years. Mother hated to do it. So the time came, a chilly Sunday afternoon in the fall, I recall. Dad was at work, and I was summoned to go to the basement—we called it the cellar—and build a fire, which I did, with great fear and trepidation but also pride at being expected to do a man's job.

The coal was reluctant, my paper wads didn't do the job, and the coal refused to ignite. I tried several times. Then I noticed a jar on the worktable with a paintbrush resting in some liquid. I'll give it a little help, I thought. It was turpentine, maybe even gasoline. I made the pile over the wad of paper, ignited the paper, and threw some of the contents of the jar in the furnace door. A fire started all right—but not in the furnace. Rather the

flames traveled up the stream of liquid and into the jar, which I dropped, of course, and it shattered, and now the cellar floor was a lake of flames. I called for help. Mother came with my little brother. She grabbed a blanket; all I had was the big coal shovel. Together we beat the flames back, and because there really wasn't much liquid, it soon was extinguished. My little brother, I recall, enjoyed the whole show, sitting on the cellar steps. Heart beating, so frightened I could barely breathe, I said to her, "Maybe you better build this fire." "No," she said. "You do it. Do it right this time."

Responsibility. Jonathan Sacks is a philosopher–theologian and Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. He has written an important book, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, in which he proposes that the idea of personal responsibility is perhaps the most critical and most promising idea in the twenty-first century. It is an idea central to the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is there on the first page of the Bible, when God says, "Let us make humankind in our image and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, birds of the air, cattle and wild animals, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." Dominion, power, responsibility. It is certainly the most radical idea in all of history. In the ancient world, the gods of mythology controlled everything: nature, history, human fertility, warfare. Human beings merely played out the script the gods had written. And in the midst of all that, the Bible makes the stunning assertion, on the very first page, that we're in charge—not the gods; we're the managers of the place. We are cocreators with God.

That revolutionary idea is expressed in the sublime poetry of Psalm 8:

> O Lord, our Sovereign,
> how majestic is your name in all the earth!
>
> . . .
>
> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
> the moon and the stars that you have established;
> what are human beings that you are mindful of them . . . ?
>
> Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
> and crowned them with glory and honor,
> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands.

From the very beginning of our faith tradition, responsibility has defined our humanity. And when things go wrong, as they frequently do, more often than not it is because someone has failed to be responsible, to take responsibility, to exercise faithful dominion. On the second page of the Bible, sin enters the story. The snake persuades Eve to eat forbidden fruit.

Eve persuades Adam. When God catches up with them and demands accountability, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the snake. No one accepts responsibility. Or, as the old confession puts it: “Merciful God, we have sinned against you by what we have done and by what we have left undone”—by responsibility unaccepted.

It is the topic of one of the last stories Jesus told.

A man goes on a journey. Before he leaves, he summons three servants and entrusts them with the management of his property, his resources. It’s in the form of talents, money. To one he gives a lot: five talents. To another, two talents; to the third, one talent. Each, Jesus says, is given according to his ability.

The question is, what to do next? How to exercise faithful responsibility?

It’s not their money. Their master is not an easy man. The first servant takes the money to market, invests, takes a risk, and it pays off. He doubles his investment. Servant two does the same thing. The third servant plays it safe; prudent, cautious, conservative, he buries his master’s money in the ground for safekeeping.

The man returns home. His servants report. Servant number one tells him what happened, and his master says, “Congratulations! Well done! You’ve been trustworthy in a few things. I’ll put you in charge of many things.” The exchange is repeated for servant two. Now the man, we have to assume, is smart, astute, worldly wise. He knows the two servants took some risks with his money. But he likes their creative, ambitious management.

Servant three reports. I wonder what he was thinking as he watched what happened with his more ambitious brothers. In any event, he pulls out his one talent. “Here it is, sir, exactly what you gave me. I’ve kept it safe while you were gone.” And for his effort, the man is treated about as harshly as anyone in the Bible: stripped of all his possessions, kicked out, and his money is added to the account of servant one.

“To all those who have more will be added.” Jesus is talking about responsibilities, not money, by the way. Jesus is talking to a group of people about to face the most critical and dangerous week of their entire lives. He’s about to be arrested, tried, and executed, and he seems to know it. They will be on their own. He’s been their leader. Now they will be in charge. He wants desperately for them to know about responsibility, dominion. They are the managers now—of their own lives and of the fragile enterprise he has started, this new thing, this quiet kingdom of compassion and kindness and reconciliation and justice and peace.

Jonathan Sacks says that for four centuries, social science has tried to convince us that we are not in charge, that personal choice and responsibility is an illusion.

Freud said we're not in charge; our subconscious drives are. Karl Marx said it's economics that form us and motivates us, economic determination. At the opposite end of the scale, market capitalism says something similar: the market will determine who we are and what we do. B. F. Skinner says it's all in our genetic code. Free will is an illusion, personal responsibility a great myth.

The late Karl Menninger, a good Presbyterian, wrote a book *What Ever Became of Sin?* in which he argued that modern life has seemed to conspire against human responsibility. Instead, life seems to be in the hands of huge, invisible forces. Instead of feeling like actors, individuals feel like victims. The result, Menninger said, is the end of personal responsibility. Whatever goes wrong is someone else's fault: the government, the company, my parents, or the ubiquitous "them."

Over against that, the Judeo-Christian tradition proposes a high view of humanity. We are made in the image of God, a little lower than God. We have dominion. We have responsibility for our own lives, our families, our community, our nation. And Christian faith is an invitation to name that, to embrace it, to stand up and be responsible.

Jonathan Sacks calls it a "great leap of biblical imagination."

At the heart of our faith is the idea that God loves the world, this world, so much that he sent his only Son to live in it, to walk its dusty roads, to live human life thoroughly, to experience the world and life in the world in all its mystery and beauty and passion and pain. He came to live life and love it and to call men and women to be responsible, to exercise dominion, to join God as managers of creation, God's responsible men and women.

You, and only you, are in charge of your life. It might not feel that way sometimes. I am sure there are days when you don't feel in control at all, that you simply respond all day long to the demands and needs and desires of others, that your little life is like a tiny cork bobbing along in a stormy, treacherous ocean. But there is a deeper truth about you. You are a child of God. You have the image of God in you. And God has given you glory and honor, dominion over creation. Responsibility for your life.

It was almost fifteen years ago that the new president of the new Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel, addressed the United States Congress. His wonderful words seem to me to be more true and more relevant than ever.

He said:

> The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than the human heart . . . in human responsibility. . . . The only backbone to our actions, if they are to be moral, is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my firm, my country, my success—responsibility to the order of being where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where and only where they will be properly judged.

God has created us to be responsible—given us glory and honor and dominion.

It's easier, of course, not to be responsible, to renege, let someone else do it, let someone else decide. The next few hours will not be easy for members of this church. The next few years, however we decide, will be demanding and challenging.

Thanks be to God for this church and for this great moment.

Thanks be to God for the gift of life—for the whole creation, for the nation, the city, and this extraordinary community.

Thanks be to God for our God-given responsibility.

Amen.